

VZCZCXRO0358

RR RUEHC/HI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH

DE RUEHHI #1374/01 2151706

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

R 031706Z AUG 07

FM AMEMBASSY HANOI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5987

INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH 3451

RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 001374

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS AND DRL/AWH

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KWMN](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN
FACES CHALLENGES

REF: HANOI 00006

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) The National Committee for the Advancement of Women in Vietnam (NCFAW) is taking on domestic violence issues, gender equality, and implementation of a national strategy on the advancement of women for Vietnam by the end of 2010. A key part of that strategy is to place more Vietnamese women into ministerial-level positions and in the National Assembly (NA), where women currently remain at just over 25 percent of all delegates. Implementing the strategy will be a challenge, as the relevant legislation on domestic violence has remained under consideration for several years and traditional attitudes of tolerance for domestic violence are only slowly changing. End Summary.

WHAT IS THE NCFAW?

¶2. (SBU) Embassy PolOff met with Ms. Nguyen Thi Hoai Thu, Deputy Director of the GVN's National Committee for the Advancement of Women in Vietnam (NCFAW) on July 24, 2007. Thu said she was eager to meet with embassy officials and discuss the workings of the NCFAW; she requested that embassy officials send more visitors in order to help increase the visibility of the NCFAW. The NCFAW is independent of its larger and better-known cousin: the Vietnam Women's Union, but Thu said the NCFAW is just as engaged on a variety of women's issues. The NCFAW was established on June 11, 2001 by an act of the prime minister to promote the "government's interest in the advancement of women." The NCFAW is comprised of 18 members, all at the vice-minister level (including officials of organizations not in the formal government cabinet, but holding equivalent rank). President of the Women's Union serves as the NCFAW Chairwoman and NCFAW vice-chairs are selected from the ministries of Education and Training and of Foreign Affairs.

¶3. (SBU) The Committee advises the Prime Minister in developing and monitoring the implementation of a national strategy and plan of action for the advancement of women's rights in the areas of labor, education, health care, social, political and economic affairs. NCFAW is the focal point for international cooperation on gender equality, and coordinates GVN policy related to compliance and implementation of the UN Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

NEW LAW ON GENDER EQUALITY

¶4. (SBU) Regarding the status of the country's first ever Law on Gender Equality, which was passed in November 2006 (Reftel), Thu said the National Commission for Population, Family and Children is the institution responsible for drafting the final three decrees on implementation and dissemination. Once complete, the final draft will be presented to several ministries for final approval. Thu was optimistic this would happen before the end of the year. Recently, there has been concern from donors that the law on gender equality may not be compatible with CEDAW, specifically the government's maintenance of a lower retirement age for women than for men. (Note: The current retirement age for men is 60 years and 55 years for women. End note.) Thu does not believe this will prove to be as contentious as some might think because the government will likely categorize retirement age by sector and "keep the lower retirement age only for those women working as factory workers and other labor intensive jobs." She added that the six chapters and 44 articles of the new gender equality law are in line with the spirit of CEDAW and the Millennium Development Goals on gender equality.

2010 STRATEGY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

¶5. (SBU) Thu highlighted NCFAW's 2010 national strategy and anti-domestic violence campaign. She believes it was an easy decision for the GVN to support the strategy since "Vietnamese women account for 50.8 percent of the population and 50.6 percent of the labor force." Specific objectives of the strategy, which started in 2006, include reducing the unemployment rate of women in urban areas to below five percent by 2010; increasing the proportion of women post-graduate degree holders to over 35 percent by 2010. In the area of health care, the strategy states that by 2010, 95 percent of women in Vietnam will have access to health care services.

¶6. (SBU) The goals for 2010 also call for the proportion of women members in the National Assembly to rise to at least 33 percent by the next session of the legislature (Note: Women in the current legislature, just elected in May, hold slightly more than 25 percent

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of the seats. End note.), and for 50 percent of political agencies at the central and local level to have women leaders by the end of 2010. The Ministries of Health, Education and Training, Agriculture and Rural Development, Labor - War Invalids and Social Affairs, and Foreign Affairs all play a part in funding and implementing the strategy.

¶7. (SBU) In discussing domestic violence, Thu once again displayed her passion for promoting women's issues. She explained that although a survey was conducted in 2001 of over 2,000 women, it is not comprehensive enough and expressed her wish to have a nation-wide survey done soon. The 2001 survey, which was conducted by the Commission on Social Affairs of the National Assembly in eight provinces throughout Vietnam, found that 25 percent of women suffer mental abuse and 30 percent have been sexually assaulted by their husbands. Thu added that, due to the severity of domestic violence in Vietnam, the government has taken steps to draft laws aimed at protecting victims and sentencing violators.

¶8. (SBU) The draft Domestic Violence Prevention and Control bill is expected to be submitted to the National Assembly for final approval by the end of the year. According to Thu, "there is a stigma attached to women who report cases of domestic violence but people in general are now much more willing to admit it exists and do more to prevent it." NCFAW sponsors workshops aimed at educating both women and men about domestic violence and also continues to highlight this issue through public awareness campaigns. The project gets much of its support from a Ford Foundation grant. While rural areas lack the financial support to provide crisis centers where women can seek shelter away from abusive spouses, villagers have established "intervention groups," allowing women to live with another family while men of the village confront the abuser. Thu believes that creating laws aimed at protecting victims is important but the key is "changing a person's mindset and educating individuals on why domestic violence is bad."

¶9. (SBU) Thu ended the meeting by reiterating earlier comments that

she would like to expand her dialogue with embassy officials and looks forward to meeting visitors who specialize in women's issues and developing a long-term dialogue.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: It is clear the NCFAW has its work cut out for it. The National Assembly fell well short of its stated goal for its May 2007 election and the 2007-2012 legislative term of achieving a level of 30 percent female delegates. In the end, the results came out at a just over 25 percent, even lower than the percentage in the previous term. The new Law on Gender Equality, which just took effect on July 1, 2007, will require that officials and others undergo extensive training - which will require significant new funding - to be implemented effectively at local levels in Vietnam. The Bill on Domestic Violence has been in draft form, and under debate, for several years. The concept that a husband has the right to "teach" his wife and children by using violence is still very deeply ingrained in some segments of the Vietnamese population and has not to date been strongly challenged in the court of public opinion. Nevertheless, there has been a political shift in thinking and an increased recognition that violence against women is a public health priority with legal, social, cultural and economic dimensions.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Ho Chi Minh City.

MARINE